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Cover Page Footnote

This article is from an earlier iteration of *Diálogo* which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

THE MYTH OF CONFLICT AND THE FORMATION OF LATINO IDENTITIES: MEXICANS AND PUERTO RICANS IN CHICAGO



Photo by Cesar Garza

By José Soltero

When I came to Chicago in the early 1990s I was surprised to hear the occasional remark on the so-called conflict between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in this city. Such statements were usually mentioned as "facts", akin to a secret shared by people who knew the insights of the Latino communities in Chicago. Having lived in Arizona for many years, the relationship between the few Puerto Ricans and the majority of Mexicans in that region of the country seemed cordial. I met several Puerto Rican students at the University of Arizona, as well as a group of "salseros/as" (Salsa dancers) in Tucson, who were eager to share their fondness for food, music, dancing, and for Spanish with the Mexican community. Furthermore, during my years as a student at the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*, relationships between Mexican students and faculty and Puerto Rican students in my program were excellent. So, I was struck about the presumed conflict that some claim exists between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans in Chicago. I began to wonder about the reasons behind the alleged division between these two communities; perhaps the discord stems from competition for scarce resources, or it could be the pronounced cultural differences manifested when larger group concentrations are present, or it has some other reasons. Even the academic community has taken note of this enigma. For example, a group of Latino students at DePaul University recently organized a panel to discuss the state of the relations between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in the city. I was inclined to believe this "urban legend" for a while until I became better acquainted with the city, met more Mexican and Puerto Rican Chicagoans and started to have serious doubts about the myth of "conflict" between these two communities. It became apparent that the empirical evidence pointing toward conflict was very weak, to say the least. For the most part, this kind of evidence rests on accounts of conflicts at the personal level and to some extent the controversial explanations regarding transformations experienced by some pan-Latino organizations in the city, which will be discussed later in this paper. Interestingly enough, those who have had a problem with a Mexican or Puerto Rican could always point to another person of the same group with

whom she/he could get along well. When pressed to supply further evidence of group conflict, people who believe there is tension between these groups often situate the divergence in the 1970s, 1960s, 1950s, or even before. Assuming some level of discord between Puerto Rican and Mexican communities is present in Chicago, would this controversy surpass the differences that are evident among Mexicans themselves, due to political, generational, class, or native vs. immigrant distinctions? Or would variations among Puerto Ricans based on political, generational, island vs. mainland allegiance, statehood, commonwealth, or independence oriented, overwhelm their divergence with Mexicans? Emerging evidence appears to point in the other direction; Puerto Ricans and Mexicans have sustained collaborative group relations in this city and have joined efforts to improve their mutual well-being. For example, there has never been a riot in which Mexicans and Puerto Ricans have clashed with each other on the streets of Chicago. On the contrary, during the Puerto Rican riots of the 1960s, testimonial accounts mention the presence of Mexican neighbors supporting the demands of the rioters (Padilla, 1997, 6).

Similarly, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago joined forces to create the *Spanish Coalition for Jobs* and *The Latino Institute*. The *Spanish Coalition for Jobs* was mainly oriented to combat discrimination and supply training and job opportunities for Latino workers in the Chicago area. The *Latino Institute* was more oriented to the needs of middle class Latinos, and enrolled a substantial segment of Latino middle class professionals in the city (Padilla, 1985). Both organizations had significant roles for Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago, although their ability to coordinate community organizations eventually declined.

Padilla's (1985) account of the weakening of the *Spanish Coalition for Jobs* and the *Latino Institute* can be interpreted as evidence of problems between Mexican and Puerto Rican community organizations or community leaders. However, an alternative view of the history of these organizations presented in Padilla's book clearly

Defendiendo lo Nuestro



implies that class differences among Latinos in the city, both Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, were the main reason behind the split between the *Latino Institute* and several barrio oriented community organizations. In the case of the *Spanish Coalition for Jobs*, after it successfully organized Mexican and Puerto Rican community organizations to jointly fight for better jobs, against discrimination, and other issues in the city, it could not successfully become a service provider organization for both communities due to the geographic dispersal of the areas where Mexicans and Puerto Ricans lived in the 1970s. Thus, the *Spanish Coalition for Jobs* during its second phase could not provide services for Puerto Ricans in Westtown and the Mexicans in Pilsen (Padilla, 1985), for example; to allocate resources to one of these communities meant to withdraw them from the other. Therefore, the limited pool of resources this organization counted with did not allow its members to satisfy the demands and needs of geographically dispersed Latino communities in the city.

Although my analysis of Padilla's book leads me to conclude that the real reasons behind the decline of the Latino Institute and the Spanish Coalition for Jobs were class differences and limited resources in a situation of geographic dispersion, respectively, some advocates of the Puerto Rican/Mexican ethnic split hypothesis may still insist in pointing to other variables as the most important causes of such a decline. More recent events in Chicago, however, seem to indicate that again, the ethnic split hypothesis is problematic.

THE GUTIÉRREZ VERSUS CASTRO ELECTION

During the 2002 Democratic primary race for the Illinois Congress in the state's only Latino district, "the irregularly shaped 4th District created to give Chicago Hispanics a voice in Congress" (Guerrero, 2002, 8), two candidates contended for this position, the incumbent Puerto Rican candidate Luis Gutiérrez and Mexican American opponent attorney Marty Castro, represented the two largest Latino blocs in the district: Puerto Rican and Mexican.

Trying to unseat Gutiérrez, Castro led a political campaign based on an ethnic split platform that focused on the needs of the population in the district, accusing Gutiérrez of giving most of the attention to Puerto Rican issues, such as the Vieques' community drive to stop the US navy from using the island as a bombing training area, underlining Gutiérrez' lobbying in 1999 to obtain presidential clemency for 11 Puerto Rican nationalists who were members of *Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional* (FALN, or Armed Forces of National Liberation), and accusing Gutiérrez of neglecting local issues that are central to the population in the district, such as gang control (Guerrero, 2002, 8).

Castro hoped that his campaign against Gutiérrez' activist approach in favor of Puerto Rican issues would undermine the incumbent votes among the Mexican electorate in the District, which outnumbered Puerto Ricans "by nearly five to one margin: 321,949 to 68,722" (Guerrero, 2002, 8). In addition, his campaign emphasized his Mexican

roots, since according to Chicago Sun Times correspondent Lucio Guerrero (2002, p. 8):

[T]o remind voters in the District of his Mexican background, Castro sent out a political mailing showing him as a young boy dressed in a mariachi outfit. It also describes—in Spanish—how much pride Castro has in his 'Mexican roots'.

The results of the election showed that the overwhelming majority of the electorate, with Gutiérrez' margin at 68 percent to Castro's 21 percent (Chicago Sun Times, 2002, March 20), supported Gutiérrez, despite Castro's efforts to divide the electorate by recurring to ethnic differences between the two candidates. Thus, the majority of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in the 4th District decided that Gutiérrez represented their interests better than Castro, despite Gutiérrez' activist Puerto Rican background. In my view, Gutiérrez' election was a partial test of the ethnic split hypothesis in Chicago and it showed that the controversial ethnic conflict between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans in Chicago, at least until now, has been exaggerated or it is a myth. In addition to the results of the Gutiérrez election, other factors seem to support my claim of the ethnic division myth.

GANGS, STUDENTS, POPULAR CULTURE, AND ETHNIC OPENNESS

Predominantly Latino gangs in Chicago tend to be open to the participation of

young women or men of various ethnic/racial background (Sánchez, 2002). During interviews of gang members that my student Melinda Torres and I conducted, the interviewees could only point to two gangs—one in the South, formed mostly by Mexican youths, and another one in the North, mainly constituted by Puerto Ricans—who were likely to restrict membership in ethnic terms. In Carlos's (not his real name) opinion (Center for Latino Research Archives, 2003):

In my gang...there are Puerto Ricans, blacks, and Mexicans...we all bleed the same.

I know a little ass gang. They are all really bad, "The Drivers." They are mostly Puerto Ricans, a few Mexicans, maybe two blacks. I've seen two blacks and one Mexican. They all are from the same neighborhood...they keep [the gang] Puerto Rican, I believe that's what they want.

In the South, there is "La Raza" gang. They are not nice. They are mostly Mexicans...I think, by the way they talk, that they are from Mexico.

...In the past, gangs were more political, they tried to help their people. That was what it was supposed to be about, but it changed...

I hypothesize that two reasons may influence these two gangs, the "Drivers" and "La Raza" biased membership—the high density of the Mexican or Puerto Rican population in the areas in which they are active, and their relative isolation from other ethnic/racial communities, given that Chicago is, after all, one of the most ethnically/racially segregated cities in the US (Massey & Denton, 1993). However, gangs in areas of the city that contain diverse ethnic groups, tend to include a more ethnic and racial heterogeneous membership in their ranks. Therefore, the overwhelming majority of the predominantly Latino gangs in Chicago are likely to be ethnically/racially inclusive.

An additional factor that has given a considerable impulse to a pan-Latino identity among Chicagoan Latinos, especially Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, is the existence of Latino student organizations in Chicago's colleges and universities. Student organizations in colleges and universities throughout

the city are open to all students, independently of their ethnic/racial background or their geographic origin. Even in cases where they may focus on Latino issues, college and universities' bylaws prohibit the restriction of membership based on ethnicity/race. Consequently, college and universities in Chicago have become an important ground for Puerto Rican and Mexican students (as well as other student groups) to meet, get to know each other, and collaborate on common tasks and projects. Although students may have a strong national ethnic identity as Puerto Ricans or Mexicans, the contact and familiarity of Mexican and Puerto Rican students in colleges and universities in Chicago has been a factor toward the formation of a broader Latino identity in the city.

Popular culture has been another significant issue in bringing together people from Mexican and Puerto Rican backgrounds. *Rock en Español*, *Hip Hop*, and *Salsa* attract significant numbers of people from the two communities and increase the likelihood of eroding the social distance among them. In the case of a popular Latin dance, Salsa, men and women from different ethnic/racial backgrounds come together. This particular subculture is open to all groups, but the majority of the participants are Puerto Rican and Mexican dancers (although other groups are present as well: African Americans, Asians, Asian Americans, Europeans, European Americans, Colombians, Cubans, Dominicans, etc.).

The cultural diversity of Mexicans has also been overviewed. For example, Salsa music is quite popular in some regions of Mexico, such as in the coastal and central areas as well as in Mexico City. For many years, Mexicans have enjoyed dancing to Puerto Rican, Cuban, and other Latin American salsa bands, such as *El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico*, which have attracted enormous crowds during their performances in Mexico City. Since early in the 20th century, Caribbean musicians have migrated to Mexico and developed successful careers, such as Cuban musician Dámaso Pérez Prado, one of the creators of *Mambo*. *Mambo* songs written by Pérez Prado became the university's "anthems" of two of the largest Mexican universities, the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*, and the *Instituto Politécnico Nacional*. This testifies to the degree of openness of the Mexican youth to Caribbean music.

Puerto Rican songs, such as "Mi Viejo San Juan" (Old San Juan), have been popularized by Mexican popular icons, such as Javier Solís, in the 1950s and 1960s. Before *Mambo* appeared in México, *Danzón* became one of the Cuban rhythms that the Mexican working class embraced in dance.

Consequently, it is no surprise that popular culture, particularly Salsa, has increased the chances of individuals from the Mexican and Puerto Rican communities to intermingle and become closer. In Chicago it is not unusual to meet biethnic individuals who have a Puerto Rican and a Mexican parent. Thus, I hypothesize that Mexicans and Puerto Ricans have a significant intermarriage rate relative to other groups in the Chicago population.

MEXICAN AND PUERTO RICAN LEADERS AND LATINO CONSCIOUSNESS

If both the Puerto Rican and Mexican electorate can support and elect a political candidate they recognize as representing their common interests, as in the case of Luis Gutiérrez in Chicago's 4th District, Puerto Rican and Mexican leaders have converged to similar ideas and goals throughout several decades as well. The work of various leaders of Mexican and Puerto Rican community organizations was an important reason behind the collaboration of both communities during the 1960s and 1970s. Their struggle was influential in the construction of the Latino identity in Chicago during those years (Padilla, 1985). Several of those social activists are still working for Latino efforts in Chicago and some of them have become dedicated leaders of their communities.

When I interviewed Carlos Arango, the Director of Casa Aztlán in the Chicago area of Pilsen, a predominantly Mexican community, I asked him about the commonalities and differences between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans in Chicago. He expressed the following (Center for Latino Research Archives, 2002):

We have a very extensive relationship with the Puerto Rican community, since we have many things in common: they have the problem of independence, we have the problem of dependence. They are citizens of this country, but are perceived as second class citizens. In our case,

either we are legal or undocumented immigrants to this country, the racist and anti-immigrant groups see us the same way. Puerto Ricans in the island and here are the same nation, the same people. Similarly, Mexicans in this country and Mexico are the same people, the same nation. Thus, we share the same vision...

I do not believe there are tensions between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, but maybe other people do. I am more optimistic. I know [the media] manipulate us during boxing matches for example. That is a way of polarizing us, but I do not think that kind of division exists in every day life. In this District, Luis Gutiérrez is the Congress representative and he is Puerto Rican...

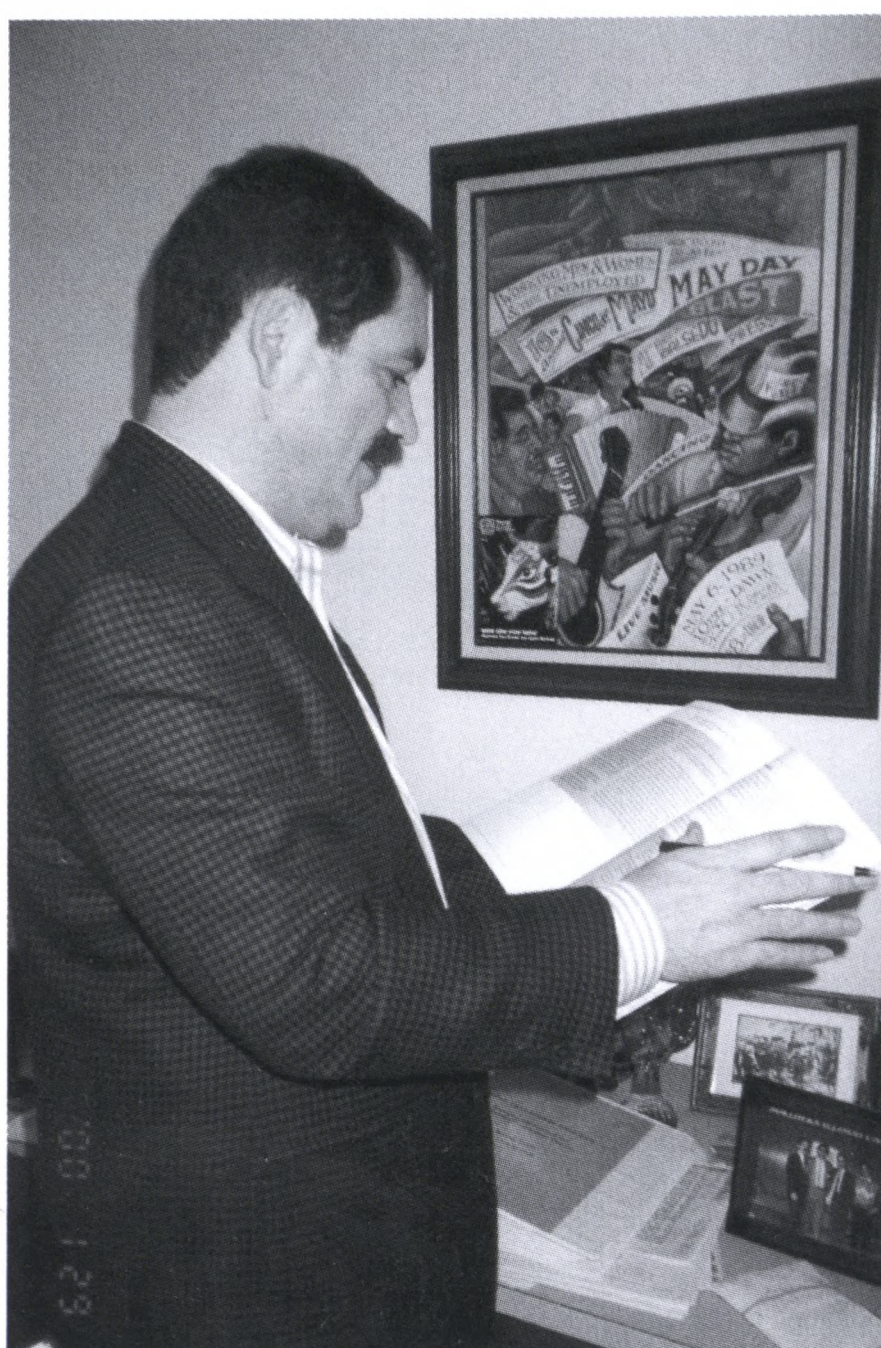
Similarly, José López, a Chicago Puerto Rican activist, interviewed by my colleagues Marixsa Alicea and Lourdes Torres, urged for the creation of common Latino agendas based on similar histories and problems that affect Latino communities in Chicago (Center for Latino Research Archives, 2002):

Puerto Ricans came here and found themselves undergoing the same process of Internal Colonialism, of objectification, that black people had gone through, that Native American people had gone through, that Mexicans had gone through...You look out there in the world and you begin to see all these little brown people no longer as little brown people, but as historical figures on the stage of history.

...I think that the future of political power is going to be what has to be good in the context of a Latino agenda. That is where both Mexicans and Puerto Ricans and other Latinos would gain. Unless we create a unified vision, there is going to be friction between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans and it is going to be easy for people who are tied to the political machines to play one against the other and obviously neither of us will gain anything...

When I interviewed Jesús García, the Director of the La Villita Community Organization, he accepted the existence of both, tension and convergence, among Mexicans and Puerto Ricans (Center for Latino Research Archives, 2002):

Photo by María Isabel Ocha



There has been some tension between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans for about 30 years. However, such a tension has not been expressed significantly. The manifestation of tension has consisted in stereotypical views about each group, for the most part. Nevertheless, since the 1970s the situation has improved. The media has been a very important factor to inform children, youth, and workers from the Puerto Rican and Mexican communities about each other...

...I have the impression that dating between young people from different groups in college increased since the 1970s. However, at UIC [University of Illinois at Chicago], most of the interaction was among Latinos, especially between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans.

Even if there is some tension between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, progressive leaders are quite united...Unity among Latinos in Chicago was an important factor to elect Harold Washington as Chicago mayor in 1983...

The similar views these leaders have on the effects of globalization on México and Puerto Rico are striking. The experiences of colonialism during the Spanish Empire and the US invasions of the 19th century have provided an unparalleled common ground for a shared, although complex, Latino identity in Chicago. The similarities between the two groups do not end in the 19th century. Both, Mexican and

Puerto Rican (im)migrants have suffered the effects of the US economic cycles. In the 20th century, Puerto Ricans experienced three stages of (im)migration (Pérez y González, 2000, pp. 33-39): the *Pioneer Migration* (1900-1945), the *Great Migration* (1946-1964), and the *Revolving Door Migration* (1965 to the present time). Analogously, Mexicans in the 20th century have gone through four (im)migration stages (Martínez, 2001, pp. 26-48): *Upsurge and Restrictions* (1900-1930), *Pressure and Repatriation* (1930-1940), *Resurgence* (1940-1965), and *Expansive Immigration and Renewed Restrictionism* (1965 to the present).

Although Puerto Ricans did not experience the policy of repatriation that Mexicans suffered in the 1930s, they have also faced discrimination, housing segregation, and other abuses and attacks in the US and Puerto Rico (Pérez y González, 2001). In addition, Puerto Ricans, like Mexicans, have been victimized by the economic conditions determined by the whims of US investments in their homelands and in the US. The changing US labor market, providing less industrial jobs, the kind that many Puerto Ricans and Mexicans have sought, has meant that a significant number of manufacturing workers have resorted to a circular migration between Puerto Rico or Mexico, respectively, and the US.

In sum, these interviews show us that among these leaders, the ethnic group conflict between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans is likely to be overemphasized, although certain tension may exist among some individuals. However, opportunistic politicians could develop a split among these communities in the future.

THE STRUGGLE FOR BILINGUAL EDUCATION

Mexican and Puerto Rican leaders of community organizations in Chicago, as mentioned above, share a global perspective of the past and present situation of their neighborhoods. The development of colonialism in general, and US capitalism in the world, has brought these communities to Chicago under similar conditions of economic exploitation, poverty, and ethnic/racial discrimination. More recently, racists and ethnocentrists in the US have been trying to disclose their hatred for Latinos behind the opposition against bilingual education (see Sonia Soltero's

article in this issue). Speaking on the struggle for bilingual education in the 1960s, 1970s, and more recent years, Puerto Rican community leader José López reflects on the bilingual education struggle (Center for Latino Research Archives, 2002):

...I remember growing up in Chicago. When I came here, most of the Puerto Rican kids that went to Anderson School, which is where I went, would be placed in the closet. Those classrooms were huge and in addition, you had some really large closets where you put your jackets during the wintertime. There's where you were placed because the teachers couldn't deal with you. Basically, what you had was, maybe, another Puerto Rican [kid] who knew a little bit more than you, and you would sit with a book and you were suppose to learn, since there was no bilingual education.

...Historically, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans were never required to know English to become citizens. In 1848, with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the United States became a bilingual country. In 1917, [with the Jones Act] someone could be a citizen without having the complete benefits of citizenship. Thus, twice, in 1848 and in 1917, this country became a Spanish [speaking country].

I think [in the 1960s and 1970s] there was a lot more push for bilingualism. I remember when we began the struggles for bilingual education, they were fierce.

...The problems we are having today [with the education of Latinos] are the consequences of [imposing] transitional bilingualism, because you are transitioning from Spanish to English, you are not developing Spanish as well as English. That is what bilingualism is...

Similarly, for Jesús García, the Mexican leader from "La Villita" (Center for Latino Research Archives, 2002), the lack of bilingual education was a difficult obstacle as well:

When I came to Chicago bilingual education did not exist in Chicago. I was afraid to go to school. I was very isolated and stigmatized for not speaking English. Fortunately, I had a bilingual Puerto Rican teacher that helped me to learn English and I started to do well in school. However,

Bilingual education is an important issue in the construction of Latino identity for progressive leaders from both Puerto Rican and Mexican communities in Chicago.



Photo by Claudia Haro Morales

my brothers did not have a bilingual teacher that could help them and their situation was more difficult than mine.

...In the 1990s, the attacks against bilingual education in Illinois did not go as far as in other states, for example in California. In part, this was due to the efforts of progressive Latino leaders and politicians in the state.

Bilingual education is an important issue in the construction of Latino identity for progressive leaders from both Puerto Rican and Mexican communities in Chicago. Unfortunately, a small percentage of Latinos do not favor bilingual education, as the passing of proposition 227 in California has shown (Soltero & White-Soltero, 1999). Nevertheless, educators and activists who support bilingual education have pointed out that the hidden intention of anti-bilingual education propositions is to monopolize native worker's access to essential skills, such as education and on-the-job training, as well as political resources, e.g. political voting and influence on legislation (Soltero & White-Soltero, 1997). Furthermore, bilingualism and biculturalism are vital skills in today's globalized economy. To deprive Latinos of their Spanish language skills and knowledge is to reduce their probability to succeed in an increasingly open and competitive global economy.

CONCLUSION

Although studies of Latino institutions and individual interactions show that exchanges among groups and individuals of Chicago's Puerto Rican and Mexican communities have been complex, including tensions and collaborations (Padilla, 1985, Rúa, 2001), I have introduced some empirical elements that tend to indicate that ethnic group conflict does not exist among these communities. I hypothesize that, ever since Puerto Ricans and Mexicans have shared the working class neighborhoods and other spaces in Chicago, personal tensions and differences have been exaggerated to constitute a myth or "urban legend." For the most part, Puerto Rican and Mexican communities and their progressive leaders have collaborated and struggled together against the attacks of conservatives. They have also

gone through a complex process of identity construction, involving political and economic processes and personal interactions that have established the bases for an emergent, constructivist, or activist Latino identity in Chicago and the US (Acosta-Belén & Santiago, 1998; Aparicio & Chávez-Silverman, 1997; Flores-González, 1999; Oboler, 1995). However, the members of these and other communities in Chicago—Latino communities in particular—should remain alert to the intents of ethnic/racial manipulation to divide them, reduce their influence, and even to keep them powerless. The recent Democratic primary election of Luis Gutiérrez demonstrated that the Mexican and Puerto Rican communities in Chicago are against colonialism and nativism.

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